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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0648  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1851  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0111  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0163  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0185  
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY), SCA/PPD, EUR/ACE

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN ELECTION DAY: HOPEFUL EXPECTANCY AMID  
EXAGGERATED OFFICIAL TURNOUT FIGURES

REF: ASHGABAT/SES-O FEBRUARY 11 E-MAIL

SUMMARY

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1. (SBU) Turkmenistan's election-day proceedings were smooth, relaxed and imbued with genuine, unusual popular enthusiasm over the day's proceedings. The already-broadcast official turnout figure of 98.25% is not credible, but should not wreck appreciation of the day's upside: Ashgabat long-timers, unanimously seconded by Embassy FSNs, sensed a novel atmosphere of national pride and hopeful expectancy. END SUMMARY.

ACTIVE, RELAXED, FESTIVE

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2. (SBU) Turkmenistan's presidential election-day activity proceeded unhindered through the polls' scheduled closing at 6 p.m. on February 11, based on observation by seven separate embassy teams visiting polling stations in Ashgabat and its surrounding districts. Throughout, the atmosphere was completely orderly, low-key and festive amid a slightly heightened uniformed security presence. Music and dance groups of young children at polling centers located in schools and clinics were ubiquitous, adding a celebratory atmosphere. Ashgabat long-timers generally voiced the impression that popular enthusiasm and restrained optimism over the day's proceedings was genuine and unusual. Embassy FSNs and Turkmenistan citizens unanimously confirm that the day's broad atmosphere of hopeful expectancy was novel, at least in the past fifteen years.

3. (U) Turnout at the outset was scant in most areas, but picked up broadly by 9:00. Embassy teams who covered previous, local elections consistently estimate they witnessed substantially more entering the stations than participated in either the July 2007 elections for members of village councils, or the December 2007 polls for members of district-level people's councils. Charge was told by officials at four polling sites that between 66% and 85% of the respective registered voters had cast ballots by very early afternoon. Local media reported turnout numbers for different regions (in improbably real time) throughout the afternoon:

typically 65% by noon, 85% by 2 p.m. and so forth.

¶4. (U) For the most part, poll officials were conspicuously relaxed and indeed welcoming of the embassy presence. Indeed, they often tried to insist on inviting embassy teams into the polling premises for tea (a hospitable gesture, but improper under standard election rules). A large OSCE delegation visited the University polling station in downtown Ashgabat at 10 a.m. escorted by MFA limos and personnel plus official TV cameras.

UN-WESTERN STANDARDS, DEFINITELY  
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¶5. (SBU) Notwithstanding polling officials' enthusiasm, meticulous regard for various basic technical electoral standards was indisputably lacking. Doors in at least some observed precincts were open before 8 a.m., and there were no evident steps or activity within to demonstrate that the transparent urns had initially been empty, etc. Likewise, although we regularly observed families entering en masse -- i.e., with all adult family members casting their own votes (as the new Election Law stipulates), rather than depending on a single family member voting for all other members (a practice widespread in the past) -- the old practice was still much alive this time, too, as numerous FSN anecdotes of indirect voting within their own families bear out. Mobile ballot boxes also were extensively taken to residences; even though the law designates them to be used only for invalids or pensioners unable to get to the voting points, there are anecdotal accounts that their use was more indiscriminate. Post also heard accounts of voters registered at one polling station who were allowed to cast their votes at another polling place.

¶6. (SBU) What was clear was that voting was taken with utmost

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seriousness as a whole both by organizers and participants. Not that there were multitudes at any point, but FSNs confirm that never in past elections have they encountered so many others waiting in line to vote. We have first-hand reports of election workers visiting buildings throughout the day to remind/urge voters to do their civic duty, mirroring the saturation visits by such workers to promulgate voter lists in the weeks before Election Day.

Marring the Picture: Official Turn-Out Claims  
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¶7. (U) This positive glow was marred by the official final turnout figures. Released even before the morning of February 12, these depicted turnout in the 97-99% range for each of Turkmenistan's six regions. This claim was manifestly absurd. Several embassy observers counted the number of voters entering the polling station in various five-minute intervals at various times of the day; with few exceptions the result averaged one to two per minute. Post sees no way to square this metric with near-total turnout. There would also seem to be the issue of registered Turkmenistan citizens living abroad, who by definition were almost certainly unable to vote (unless another family member voted for them), though guesses of their total number vary so wildly (from a few tens of thousands to a million) that no estimate of this effect can be hazarded.

COMMENT  
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¶8. (SBU) Exaggerated turnout figures aside, post assesses the events of February 11 to be consistent with the notion that this first "contested" presidential election overall was a half-step in the right electoral direction for Turkmenistan, and was broadly sensed as such by the population. End Comment.

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